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ARTS&LIFE

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A champion of avant-garde

KEN VANDERMARK is an eloquent spokesman for a vital music that is too often misunderstood

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

SUONI PER IL POPOLO

Ken Vandermark, who will be playing at the Suoni per Il Popolo festival, received a MacArthur grant in 1999.

There's a standard jokey question in avant-garde musical circles: "Is there a band in Chicago that Ken Vandermark does NOT play in?" The 45-year-old saxophonist and clarinetist, a renaissance man of new music, was once counted among no less than 18 groups – ranging from free to structured to standards to electro-acoustic to James Brown-inspired funk, and more. In 1999, Vandermark raised eyebrows by receiving a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius award" at a relatively young age to pursue his goals, wherever they led him. To say he's achieved them wouldn't quite be accurate, as he will be the first to tell you that moving forward is an ongoing process, vital to the future of jazz and, indeed, all musical genres.

Two of his groups – the Vandermark 5 and the Frame Quartet – are part of a stellar lineup at this year's 10th edition of the Suoni Per Il Popolo festival, starting tonight, that amounts to a who's who of avant-garde music over the past 40 years.

Massachusetts-born Vandermark attended McGill University from 1982 to 1986 and has a strong following here as a result of his gigs at the Casa del Popolo nexus. He is also one of the most eloquent spokesmen for a vital music that is too often misunderstood.

Q: You play in so many bands in so many styles. Do you face the criticism that you might be spreading yourself too thin?

A: All the time. I can see where that perception comes from, but the way I think of music is not limited to one thing. Due to the work I'm interested in, I need to find a variety of outlets for it. Every person, including myself, has different kinds of skills and interests; putting together a group that deals with a very specific esthetic, it makes sense to pick the best people for that project ... I won't do it if there's no clarity behind why the group is together. To get a sense of what I'm about musically you'd need to be aware of the variety of what I'm doing, because it's all connected.

Q: When I was growing up, you were introuse bag and therefore you couldn't be in another bag. Is this variety you speak of an outmark of our era?

A: People whose work I really admire, like Miles Davis or John Coltrane, went through stylistic shifts and developments in the course of their careers. Most of the people I work with ... try to find new hybrids to create something that's personal. I think that process has always been there, but the difference in recent years is that now musicians tend to work in parallel with a multiplicity of ideas as opposed to having one group with whom they work for years.

Q: You've stayed in Chicago for years, and there are people in New York City who wonder why you don't move there.

A: Chicago is an amazing place to work, giving me a lot of opportunities to work with people not only from the States but also Europe. The cost of living is considerably less than that of New York or Brooklyn. That doesn't necessarily give musicians a lot more creative freedom – because that's always up to the individual – but there's less of a negative competitive energy (getting gigs) than what I sometimes see coming out of New York.

Q: Some people think the so-called golden age of the avant-garde is over, ending around 1970. What do you think of the term avant-garde?

A: It's something I believe in. I think that in every creative field, whether it's mathematics or painting, there are always people who are pushing to find something different and maybe even new to say. Without the avant-garde in the arts and sciences we would be treading the same water over and over again. To me, the idea the avant-garde stopped in 1970 is not really looking at what happened since then. I mean, everyone likes certain kinds of music and some people's tastes lean one way or the other, but to me the issue isn't really that jazz is dead, but that it's shifted into directions that some people might not prefer. ... But musicians have always subscribed to the idea of looking for new things to say. There won't be another Charlie Parker or another John Coltrane, no one is ever going to sound like them again.

Q: Critics tend to think in terms of golden ages, no matter what genre, but it seems to me that music is one glorious continuum. Do you think critics have too much sway in the mindset that conditions people to think of golden ages that will never happen again, therefore what's going on can't match up?

A: In general, critics have done a lot of damage to the perception of the music. Anybody I know who plays the music are music fans firstly, and they just want their music to be heard, and allow the public to choose. If jazz is an art form, it's going to constantly change and shift. ... I mean, you're not going to get better than Louis Armstrong, but there can be differences, such as people like Lester Young or Coltrane who changed the music. The preponderance of focus in the U.S. on the work of the Lincoln Center and Wynton Marsalis is a sign that there's a problem. Mr. Marsalis seems to want to codify what jazz is about, and I think that's a huge mistake. As soon as you define an art form, it's done, it's over ... 50 years from now, when people ask "is so-and-so as significant as Ornette Coleman?" in some cases they're going to answer yes, because the music is going to keep changing.

I think that right now we are in a golden age. You have amazing collaborations of people from each continent with an amazing mix of ideas. A great example is Berlin, because it's a very international scene and you can hear people coming from different countries and cities and bringing characteristics of those individual scenes and having those ideas rub against each other. ... The force of a central location on what it does to creative work is really important, and it's happening now in Berlin. The best of is going to stick around.

Q: What's the difference between recording experimental music and performing it live?

A: Music in general, and this kind of music (that deals) with lots of spontaneous choices and creativity, needs to be heard live. ... I'd be lying if I said recordings didn't influence me. The only evidence I have of Coltrane is from recordings and TV footage; without them, there'd be a massive gap in my understanding of music. But there's no question that the music that's had the most impact on me are the things I've heard live. ... People who are in the same room together, performing and listening, are having a unique experience because, at its best, no one knows what's going to happen next. You can only have that experience live. ... I've played Montreal (many times) and what's fantastic is that many people will come back and see how the group has changed. They have an insight into the music that for me is more valid than someone who just owns a bunch of my records.

The Suoni Per Il Popolo Festival runs from tonight through June 26. For tickets and info call 514-284-0122 or visit info@suoniperipopolo.org

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The voice of video games

AL KRATINA
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Mark Camacho does not like to be set on fire. Nor does he enjoy being drowned, or thrown from a building. But, as if labouring under a horrific Greek curse, he's often subjected to such torments.

At least he has to pretend. A frequent video game voice actor and director, Camacho says that like many others in the field, he dreads recording "oh nos," which he defines as "death sounds."

"Whether the (character) is getting shot, hit, punched, kicked, thrown off a cliff or drowned, we have to make all those sounds," he explains, "and they have to sound real. Otherwise, the gaming experience just sounds like a cartoon."

Fuelled by local studios of major international players like Ubisoft, Eidos and ADM, Montreal's video game industry is booming. Warner Bros. recently announced plans to open a game studio in Montreal, and dozens of smaller developers make everything from iPhone games to downloadable Wii versions of dirty playing cards. And many of these games require professional voice actors like Camacho.

Of course, video game voice acting isn't just finding the perfectly-pitched death rattle. A veteran film and TV actor, Camacho has been involved in video games since 1984's Jagged Alliance, a tactical, mercenary-based RPG game that essentially simulates having Chuck Norris run a Dungeons & Dragons campaign. He's since provided voices for more than a dozen games, and is working on his third as a voice director, so he's had first-hand experience of what developers are looking for.

"It's complete realism," says Camacho, "the player has to feel that they're in the middle of (something) extremely real in order to enhance their gaming experience." Fabien Noel, an audio director at Ubisoft, agrees. "We need to build strong characters, and voice is critical," says Noel. "We want immersion, we want variety ... we want personality."

Noel's most recent project is the just-released Splinter Cell: Conviction, the latest in a popular, critically acclaimed line of games that explore the various ways to kill terrorists quietly, which hit shelves in April. Despite the stealth aspects of the Splinter Cell series, voice – and sound – is critical to the experience.

"In Splinter Cell, you need to understand where your enemies are, so the sound feedback is really important. Are you making too much noise? Are you silent? All these infiltration aspects of the game make the sound (integral)."

And since some video game story lines branch almost endlessly, like a fractal version of a Choose Your Own Adventure novel, the dialogue becomes increasingly complex.

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William Parker, Globe Unity Orchestra, Alexander von Schlippenbach Trio among festival's top names

SUONI PER IL POPOLO

William Parker

In addition to Ken Vandermark, the Suoni Per Il Popolo Festival is presenting an awesome lineup of the top names in outward-bound jazz:

Globe Unity Orchestra (Sala Rossa, June 20): Legendary free-jazz ensemble, first formed in Europe in 1966 by pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach, has included many of the world's top jazz players and free thinkers over its periodic incarnations. After an absence of a decade, the group reconvened in the 2000s; their appearance at the Suoni marks their Canadian debut, a real coup for the fest. Be prepared for a roaring blast of blazing sounds – there's nothing quite like it in any music.

Alexander von Schlippenbach Trio (Casa del Popolo, June 21): The Berlin-born percussive pianist, 72, is equally at home with chance-music and pointillism as he is with more traditional forms.

William Parker, Hamid Drake & Kidd Jordan Trio (Sala Rossa, June 10): Parker was dubbed "the most influential bassist/leader since Mingus" (by Richard Cook & Brian Morton in The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings); his partnership with equally proficient drummer Drake is hailed as the most dynamic rhythm section in any genre. Parker, who runs the boundary-breaking Vision Festival in New York, offers musical refuge to the under-recorded discursive New Orleans saxophonist Jordan after Hurricane Katrina; Jordan, in turn, was knighted by the French government.

Evan Parker Quartet (Casa del Popolo, June 19): At 66, the prolific-in-all-genres British saxophonist (a member of Globe Unity), was described by The Guardian as a "gateway drug" to a free-improv addiction. With supremely high technical standards as legendary as his independent thinking (and a lyrical touch), Parker's work ranges from straight-ahead to free to electro-acoustic on a huge variety of recordings.

Matthew Shipp Trio (Sala Rossa, June 14): On the tip of 50, former boy-wonder Shipp has delighted (and offended) jazz fans with his "I am the greatest" spiel in solo, trio and quartet settings (including his longtime association with the great saxist David S. Ware). With an impeccable touch matching his bravado, he might be considered as the outward-bound alternative to Keith Jarrett.

Eric Boeren 4tet (Casa de Popolo, June 23): Often compared to Ornette Coleman, the Dutch cornetist is as quirkily entertaining and free as his drummer, the madcap Han Bennink, who must be seen to be believed.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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